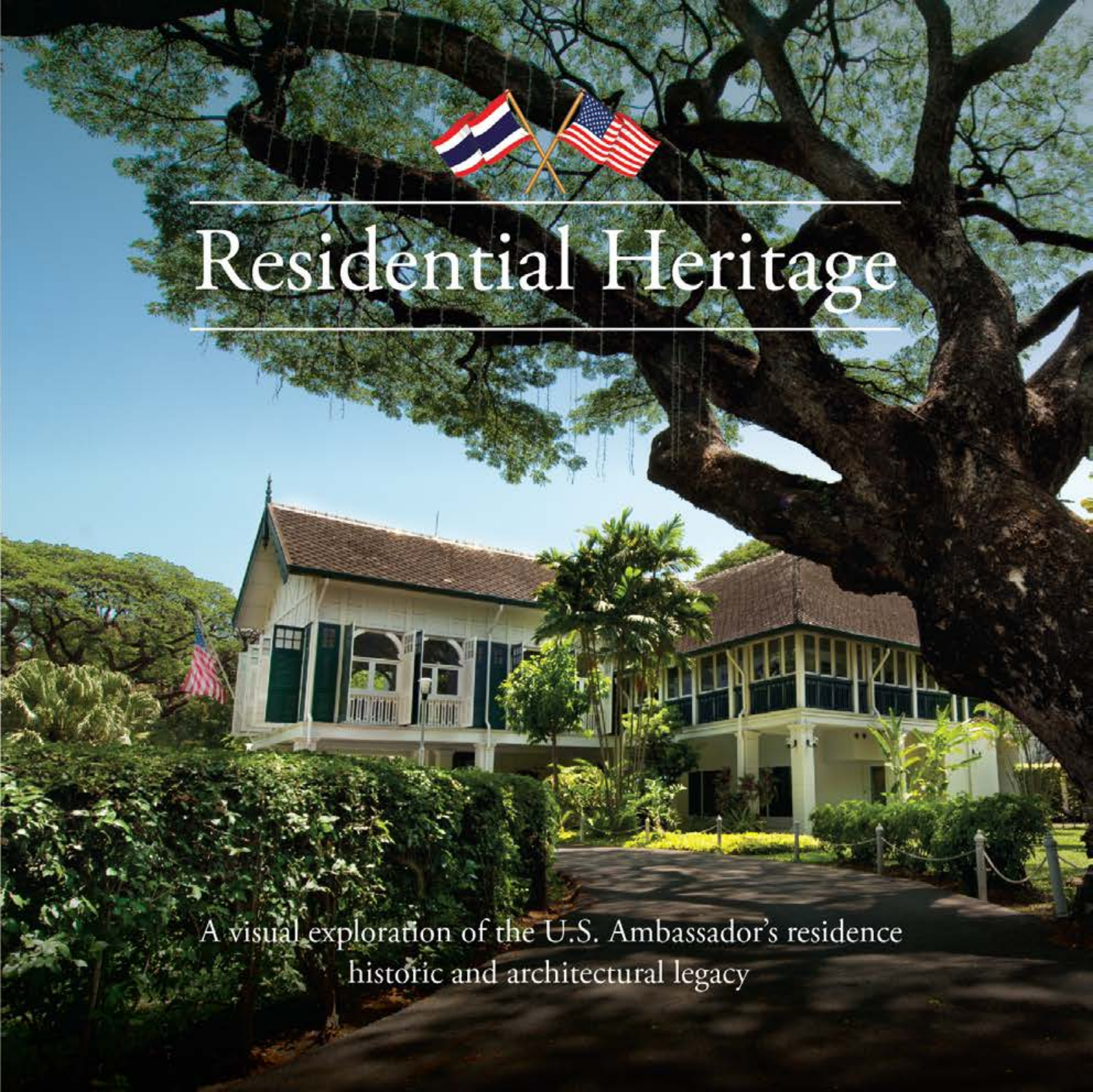




Residential Heritage

A visual exploration of the U.S. Ambassador's residence
historic and architectural legacy



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To appreciate the United States Ambassador's home in Bangkok, with its graceful architecture and lush grounds, one needs to understand the people and events that transformed a rice field distant from the old city to the welcoming home of today.

By the late 1800s, the area east of Rattanakosin was filled with verdant rice fields, interlaced with large and small khlongs and dotted by small, scattered farms. Into this agricultural setting came several visionaries, including the Englishman Franklin Hurst and Sino-Thai entrepreneur Lert Sreshtaputra, also known as Nai Lert.

Hurst proposed to the royal family an unlikely addition to the Bangkok countryside: a club with a horse racing track and a sports field. Hurst's vision was well timed and, after 11 years of successful club operation, King Rama V granted a charter to the club in 1901, stipulating the name that it still bears today, the Royal Bangkok Sports Club (RBSC). The RBSC was for many years the only major development in the area.

Nai Lert also ignored the distance from Rattanakosin, envisioning the miles of fields as residential neighborhoods. Nai Lert believed so completely in the residential potential of the area that he began to purchase tracts around Phloenchit and to divide them for residential buildings. To enhance the attractiveness of these tracts, he imported from Brazil and planted hundreds of albiza saman trees, also known as rain or five o' clock trees. These non-native trees quickly thrived in the Thai climate, adding valuable shade under their majestic, spreading crowns, and giving the neighborhood a look unlike any other in the city.

Initially and despite Nai Lert's efforts, few city dwellers were interested in living so far from the city. Roads remained, for the most part, unreliable paths between khlongs or farms, including the still scrawny and unnamed dirt path between the two major khlongs extending eastward from Rattanakosin, Khlong Thanon Trong to the south and Khlong Saen Saep to the north. At that path's midpoint, however, Dr. Alphonse Poix, a French doctor who acted as royal physician to King Rama V, apparently shared Nai Lert's vision and erected a stately house on a large piece of land. This house, which would later be the longtime home of the Prince Regent, Prince Boworadet, and today the home of the Netherlands Ambassador, set an early tone of elegance in this part of the countryside.



Horatio V. Bailey

Personifying Bangkok's boom growth was Horatio Victor Bailey. By 1913, Bailey (also known as Henry or simply H.V. in some texts) was a well-connected Bangkokian and a long way from the brash 18-year old who had reputedly forfeited his English family fortune and ventured to the Kingdom of Siam in response to a Bangkok Dock Company Ltd. advertisement in 1900. A restless engineer, Bailey quickly moved on from the Chao Phraya's docks to oversee the construction of a new Bangkok mint as Engineer-In-Chief to the Royal Mint Department. Bailey then parlayed his skills and royal connections to found his own engineering consultancy, which kept his attention for only two years before he formed yet another business, the Siam Import Company, a powerhouse that brought to the consumers of Siam everything from motorcars to insurance, and from champagne to disinfectant.



Dining Room



View from the Front Gate



View of the Grounds



Living Room circa 1915



Living Room and Dining Room



Swimming Pool and Tea House



Open Verandah



Dining Room



Bailey was no doubt aware of his stature in 1913 and chose an area for his home that he believed befitted his standing. As an RBSC trustee and avid horseman, Bailey was familiar with and drawn to the landscape surrounding the RBSC. Perhaps inspired by Poix's estate, Bailey called on several friends and proposed that they all build estates in a place that would afford them ample space to raise horses to be raced at the RBSC. Bailey chose a 250 square yard plot near the Poix estate and began digging a ring canal and designing his own house.

Bailey sited his house at the back third of the property, in view of but at a discrete distance from the dirt road that inevitably would be developed someday. A visitor to the house would leave that road, pass through wrought iron gates and travel toward the main house on a modern rock drive. While by no means lush, the grounds showed the future promise of 34 sapling rain trees (courtesy of Nai Lert) and various young bushes, fruit and flower trees. To the right, surrounded by two canals, the stables could easily be seen: a clear statement of the owner's avocation and stature to those outside the gates. Traveling further around the circular drive, a visitor would come to the main

house, with its overhanging, semi-closed deck forming a welcoming porte-cochère. Cars would be parked in a motorcar house on a spur road to the north of the main circular drive.

Before entering the house, an early visitor could see, to the north of the house, a multi-level, Chinese style aviary and, at the northwest corner, a commanding windmill, turning in the breeze and drawing fresh water up for the household. Walking on a path from the front drive south of the house, Bailey's welcoming and prominent bathing sala would come into view in the southwest corner of the property. There, adjacent to the bathing sala, Bailey widened and deepened the western and southern border canals to form a large, square bathing pond. Perhaps you would have been invited here to one of Bailey's many lovely bathing sala parties, or simply to enjoy a respite from the city heat with a dive from Bangkok's first springboard into the cool water. Partygoers or swimmers would see, glancing back at the house, the head gardener's house, a garden, various servants' quarters and two separate kitchen buildings, each one flanking, but not connected to, the main house.



Exterior Photos of the US Ambassador's Residence in 2017

For the main house architecture, Bailey chose a playful combination of European colonial, restrained gingerbread and tropical Malaysian designs, harmonized with Siamese architecture's elegance, intricacy and neatness. His design was consistent with several other houses built in Bangkok at the time, and was popular not only with Thais, who adored its craftsmanship, but with Bailey's peers, who thought the design elegant and wealthy.

When viewed from the front, the Bailey home appeared set back with a section extending a welcoming, elevated veranda forward. The house was built on strong wooden stilts, with living areas above the ground in anticipation of the annual rainy season flooding. Essentially a durable frame that supported the roof and floors, the house needed no load-bearing walls, greatly increasing the flexibility of the interior layout.

Capped with a hipped concrete tile roof designed to look like slate, the house boasted eaves that extended far from the exterior walls, giving the home protection

from Bangkok's ample sun and rain. The front gable, commanding attention from the street and those coming up the front drive, was half-timbered (brown timbers on white stucco, a salute to Bailey's British heritage), and bordered by ornamental bargeboard (a nod to Siamese wood craftsmen). For those enjoying the broad, elevated front veranda, full-length storm shutters could be held open or adjusted into several positions to ensure airflow and some protection from sun, storms and insects. Around the main body of the house, gently ornamented braces punctuated the eaves, a design element carried through to the bathing sala. Beneath the eaves was an exterior gallery with teak flooring that encircled the house, enclosed only with railings and balustrade that echoed, albeit with less detail, fretwork inside the house. Visitors could use this gallery, festooned with plants and chairs, to sit or walk around the outside of the interior rooms. On the inside wall of the gallery were casement windows or openings, which could be opened to allow more airflow into the interior.



While the exterior structures demonstrated Bailey's talents, the interiors reflected his sense of perspective and style. Although Bailey had three Thai wives (Khun Noey, Khun Waad and Khun Lek, simultaneously) and at least six children while living here, a visitor to the house would clearly see that this was a man's home. Bailey would most often take his dinner, prepared in the exterior English-style kitchen by his Indian chef (the other exterior kitchen was a Thai style kitchen for his wives), with gentlemen friends in the coolness of the bathing sala. Following dinner, they would repair to the billiard room, entered from the semi-enclosed tiled area under the main house, set with wicker chairs and tables. There, Bailey and his guests would have cigars and drinks around the massive snooker table dominating the half-timbered room. While perhaps not as fancy as a dance at the Bangkok United Club, on whose board Bailey served, these evenings at the Bailey home were coveted by Bangkok high society.

From the ground floor, guests mounted the wooden stairs to a window-lit landing, turn right and continue up the remaining stairs to the enclosed veranda that extended from the body of the house. Set with chairs, a divan and card tables and enclosed only by shutters, the veranda provided guests with a place to play cards, have tea and socialize. Bailey designed the veranda to intersect with the gallery around the house and gave the room character with ceiling fans, teak flooring and shutter openings topped by an arcade of "broken" arches. A close look at the false corbel, or wooden base, of each of these arches revealed Bailey's whimsical side: gargoyle-like carved human faces, facing inward, with both European and Asian features.





Turning back toward the interior of the house, a series of arches that mimic the broken arches unified the veranda with the main house. Crossing over the gallery through double doors, one encountered the library and the adjacent dining room, instantly aware of the common features of each: soaring 12 foot walls with heavy brown teak wainscoting, topped by six feet of white ornamented fretwork and coffered ceilings. These interior walls were sophisticated, masculine and dark. In contrast, the wooden fretwork encircling the top of each room was white and carved in an unadorned, vertical and faintly art nouveau style, venting in light and air from the external gallery into each room where the air was circulated by ceiling fans. In both rooms, large oriental rugs covered the teak floors and light from outside was augmented by several ornamental electrical chandeliers. Bailey set the library apart by impressive wall book shelves enclosed with glass paneled doors, and displayed his fine silver pieces on the sideboards of his dining room, modestly set with a table for eight.

In the center of the house, Bailey positioned a music room, perhaps to shield musical instruments from the light and air of Bangkok, but more likely to allow music played in the room to permeate the house through the high fretwork. Bailey also put two bedrooms on this level, but family members rarely used them for sleeping. Instead, bedding was stored in one or both bedrooms and transported to the presumably cooler rear gallery in the evenings, where the family would sleep together.



Interior Views of the US Ambassador's Residence in 2017



Exterior Photos of the US Ambassador's Residence in 2017

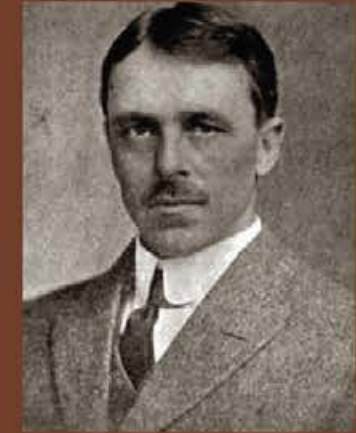


Exterior Photos of the US Ambassador's Residence in 2017

Within several years of moving in, Bailey employed twelve full time gardeners, two guards, about 25 stable hands and at least 25 household staff to run his estate. Continued prosperity for Bailey seemed guaranteed, but on a solo trip to New York at the age of 40, Bailey died. The circumstances of his death were as unclear and mysterious as the disposition of his estate: although he had appointed solicitors to manage the house (with the Dickensian names of Baguley and Tooth), he left no funds to his family. By family accounts, Bailey's widows, unable to maintain the house or staff or to stop arguing about the lack of money, left the property by 1922.

Baguley and Tooth likely saw no value in leaving the property dark, especially as the neighborhood was in furious bloom. Amid the suburban rice fields, the RBSC was now flanked by the fledgling Chulalongkorn University. About a half of a mile south of the Bailey estate, King Rama VI had gifted 142 acres of cultivated space and dubbed it Lumpini Park. On its southern

border grew the recently named Rama IV Road. At the corner of Lumpini Park, the royal family had planted, a "safe" distance from the city core, Thailand's first radio (or, in the vernacular of the day, "wireless") transmitter station. Bangkok celebrated this exciting innovation by dubbing the widened and graveled road extending north past Bailey's estate as Thanon Wittayu or Wireless Road. At the corner of Thanon Wittayu and Soi Ruam Ruedee, Prince Rangsit constructed an impressive Swiss-German chateau, the Vittayu Palace. At the northern end of Thanon Wittayu, the British Embassy purchased 13 acres of land from Nai Lert for their new embassy, escaping the congestion of Charoen Krung Road and the nonstop sawmill noise from across the Chao Phraya River. Although visitors protested that this new location "wasn't convenient" and "on fringe of town," the decision proved a masterstroke: the British were able to pay for the new land and all the buildings with the proceeds from the sale of their riverside location and have ample money left over.



Raymond B. Stevens

The solicitors leased the Bailey property, on a year-to-year basis, to the Belgian minister to Siam, Baron de Villenfagne, who remarked that the house was "without doubt one of the most beautiful in all of Bangkok. The entire living area is raised one story above the ground thus making it cooler. The house is located in the center of a large compound. The building, carefully planned down to the last detail, together with the garden make a truly elegant legation."

While the Belgian residency was uneventful, after four years, Baguley and Tooth put the property up for sale. The location and the 196,000 tical (Baht) price tag caught the eye of the Siam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was looking for an official residence for its American advisor, Raymond B. Stevens. Siam valued Stevens, like his predecessor advisors, to help with Siam's development and reforms and trusted him because they thought the Americans could balance European influence in the region. After six months of negotiating, Baguley and Tooth sold the property to the Ministry of Finance for 180,000 ticals (US\$5,237 or about \$71,000 in 2017 money), split the money among Bailey's wives, and gave the Belgians three months to vacate.





Stevens proved to be the first savior of the estate, much of which had fallen into disrepair and disuse by 1927. Before moving from the cramped American Legation on Thanon Sathorn, Stevens helped the Belgians find a new home and oversaw two months of extensive renovations to the Bailey estate. Stevens transformed the grounds by removing the stables, the external Thai kitchen and the windmill (flowing water was now readily available), upgrading servants' quarters, and repairing the bathing sala and pathways. In the main house, Stevens upgraded bathrooms with new septic tanks and flowing water, improved and modernized the formerly British kitchen (removing the other external kitchen), added a new porch and several new doors, and attended to leaks, painting, tiling and wiring. As a final modern touch, Stevens installed telephones. The house gleamed anew and all for the reasonable cost of THB 10,200 (\$257 or \$4,051 in 2017).

Stevens conducted one more cycle of repair 1930, although records do not provide detail on what was completed. He lived at the estate until 1935 when he was succeeded, both in office and home, by Frederick R. Dolbeare. Dolbeare also added his touches to the house in 1938, enclosing the upper level patio to make a more useful and formal living room. With a war raging in Europe and increasing tensions in Southeast Asia, Dolbeare resigned in 1940, ending the role of independent American advisors in (now) Thailand, and leaving the house unoccupied.





Ambassador Edwin F. Stanton

On December 2, 1941, Japanese troops entered Bangkok, rounding up foreign residents. Americans took shelter in the American Legation compound until their repatriation was arranged eight months later. Few public buildings were spared, including the estate on Wireless Road. Japanese troops broke into the estate, used the grounds for materiel storage and stuffed the buildings with troops. The main house did not fare well: troops stained the patio tiles with motor oil and scorched the fine teak flooring in the main house with their charcoal cooking braziers. Apparently, in response to shortages, troops also ripped out all the plumbing

and electrical wiring from the estate's buildings. The elegant library bookshelves, with their glass doors, also appear to have disappeared during this time. By the end of the war, departing troops left the grounds strewn with trucks, gun carriages and tanks, many jutting out of the waters of the canals surrounding the estate. Like many Bangkok buildings at the end of the war, the Wireless estate appeared beyond repair.

But unique diplomatic machinations and the will of a United States Foreign Service spouse saved the estate.

Following the end of the war, career Foreign Service Officer Edwin F. Stanton was appointed Minister to Thailand. He and his wife, Josephine, arrived in Bangkok in April 1946 with the city awash in black mourning clothes and bunting for the untimely death of King Rama VIII. He and Mrs. Stanton moved into the Legation quarters at 125 South Sathorn Road, which Mrs. Stanton quickly found had "no comfort, no privacy" and no doors to shut between the living quarters and the offices below. In his memoirs, Stanton notes, "I don't know what Josie had expected, but the partitioned rooms, the depressing bits of furniture and the antiquated bathroom with large earthenware pots to hold water quite stunned her." After several months of Legation staff bursting into the Stanton's living quarters, Mrs. Stanton had no further patience for the place and demanded that her husband get State Department permission to find better quarters.



With State's authorization for the Stantons to rent a "suitable residence," Mrs. Stanton scoured Bangkok. Options were limited: many houses were destroyed or unlivable as a result of the occupation. Two properties, which she loved, were snatched away by others offering to pay higher rent. Frustration was high until one day, the Stantons set out to the Prince Regent's house (the Poix mansion, which was then occupied by members of the British armed forces). As they drove along a "bumpy dirt side street" that "during the rainy season became a muddy mess and was almost impassible" (Wireless Road), they spotted the old Bailey house. Their initial impression was not good: "sagging...painted chocolate brown, shutters hanging precariously; indeed the whole house listed to one side...the extensive garden crammed with rusted war junk." But Mrs. Stanton saw promise.

Stanton tried to temper his wife's expectations by explaining that the State Department would not pay for renovations of the house at 108 Wireless Road. But, as he reflected in his memoirs, "I did not reckon with the ingenuity of a woman who has made up her mind. 'Leave it to me,' she said." Mrs. Stanton immediately called the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating bluntly that the Stantons were willing to rent the property if the Ministry paid for the repairs. The stunned Ministry agreed.

The Crown Property Bureau (CPB) drew up a two-year, renewable lease with favorable payment terms, dated January 1, 1947, for the "residence located at 108 Wireless Road, of ten rooms with a garden of about three acres, to be used for a diplomatic residence in Bangkok." This CPB lease, although modified somewhat through the years, remains in effect today.

Repairs began in earnest, with Mrs. Stanton supervising an army of workers to rid the house and grounds of

junk and to make the home a suitable diplomatic residence. Over the next six months, the house's wiring, plumbing and structural integrity were restored. Floors were resurfaced and walls painted, enhancing the original elements of the house design. The gallery surrounding the house was enclosed, giving the Stanton's additional living space. Windows were installed in the elevated front veranda, giving the massive room at the top of the stairs greater promise as an entertainment space. The original ground level billiards room was converted into a dining room, and new bathrooms were installed.

As the renovation neared completion, Minister Stanton would visit the house daily. One day, he found his wife sitting on the tile floor of the ground floor surrounded by workers mixing various cans of paint. He asked her how things were progressing and when she thought they would move in. Mrs. Stanton, clearly buoyed by the results of the work so far, exclaimed with a smile "as soon as I get the Williamsburg blue just right."

She did get that color right and used it throughout the house, especially on the walls of the gallery. But one more thing stood in the way of moving in: a rather substantial python in the garden. While by no means afraid of the other beasts that roamed the estate, like tortoises, snowy white egrets, monitor lizards, and a monkey (that would later vex her as she rowed a boat in the estate's canal), Mrs. Stanton drew the line at the python. She hired a snake charmer who could not find the python, then a big game hunter who, when trying his lasso, was encircled by the snake. As the python began crushing him, the hunter pled for help from groundskeepers, promising them a monetary reward for his freedom. The groundskeepers, at last, freed the desperate, bargaining hunter after he finally named the reward level they thought was acceptable.



Interior Views of the US Ambassador's Residence in 2017



Events during Ambassador Graham Martin's time in the residence, 1963-1967

The Stantons moved in and fell in love with 108 Wireless. Thai friends brought congratulatory trees and flowering bushes, like cannas, hibiscus, gardenias and orchids, which the Stantons added to the increasing lush grounds of the house. Although they had a "sun baked bedroom," the Stantons loved the early mornings of Bangkok, when they would enjoy the cool air at breakfast outside, with trailing crimson bougainvillea, red hibiscus, yellow and pink canna lilies bordering the canal, and their dog, Mr. Nuisance, happily roaming about the yard. Each day, at exactly five minutes to eight, Stanton's driver, Nai Chin, would pull the big black Packard automobile out of the garage at the end of the drive spur and swing under the porte-cochère to pick up the Minister for work on the other side of Lumpini Park. When he returned home at the end of the day, Stanton would be delighted to find his wife entertaining guests in their garden. In this way, their home went beyond being a house. Stanton remarked, "In periods of stress and strain, our house always became a busy center as politicians, their wives and friends tried to talk to us privately rather than appear at the Embassy."

By April 1947, the American Legation was upgraded to a full Embassy and Minister Stanton became

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Stanton. 108 Wireless became the Chief of Mission's Residence, or the CMR.

Since the Stantons departed "the sprawling hospitable house," the CMR has been home to 21 United States ambassadors. Each has maintained the CMR and a few have made improvements to the original, noble design. The first major change came in 1954 in anticipation of a visit from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Given that the main house, even when reconfigured, had limited space for guests, the Thai government agreed to build a new, separate guesthouse with three bedrooms. The new guest quarters, located to the right of the house when viewed from Wireless Road, served Dulles well, but resulted in a delay to another improvement: air conditioning. Dulles apparently visited Bangkok during a rare cool streak and later refused requests to install central air conditioning in the main house, remarking that the climate that he had experienced simply did not warrant it. This misperception was eventually overcome and central air conditioning was finally installed at the CMR in 1973, greatly improving the Ambassadors' ability to entertain inside the house.

Today, the CMR is maintained continuously by the Ambassador, by the Ambassador's family and by dedicated Embassy staff. In addition to daily maintenance, the CMR regularly receives fresh paint, new floor finishes and mechanical repairs. A visitor today feels the hominess and elegance of the original Bailey house improved for modern times. The heavy, dark wainscoting interior walls and blue gallery have been brightened with white paints to match the still stylish overhead fretwork, giving the interior a bright airiness that departs from the original heavier, British masculinity. Similarly, the dark half-timbering on the exterior walls has been painted white, making the overall architectural impression of the home distinctly more tropical. The rich teak floors, which

still bounce ever so slightly underfoot, have been lovingly preserved. The tiled reception area first floor has been completely enclosed with folding glass doors, enabling the space to be cooled and used for large events in hotter months.

For its continuing efforts and success to preserve the CMR, the Embassy was awarded the 1984 Architectural Conservation Award by the Association of Siamese Architects. This care and preservation also allows the CMR to continue as the inviting and refined home of the United States Ambassador, and as a tangible symbol of the close friendship between Thailand and United States.

Credits:

Thank you to the Embassy Bangkok Brochure design team for capturing the timeless beauty of the U.S. Ambassador's residence:

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